**Love and Live**
**Luke 10:25-37**
**Coe College Baccalaureate**
**John Buchanan**
**May 12, 2013**

There is something wonderfully timeless and profoundly important about Baccalaureate and Commencement weekend on a college campus, and I am grateful to be part of it. Thank you for the honor of being the preacher at your Baccalaureate and a participant in this amazing and good occasion.

And thank you for inviting me back to Coe College, one of the great schools started by Presbyterians. You were generous enough to award me with an honorary Doctorate in 1990 and I have worn the Coe College Hood with pride. It is particularly attractive and stunning — gold and crimson. Whenever it was a festive occasion (some would say "festive Presbyterian" is an oxymoron) but whenever I wanted to liven things up on Sunday morning in the staid Gothic sanctuary of Fourth Presbyterian Church, I put on my Coe College Hood and it did the trick.

I'm glad to be here with Kristin Hutson, your outstanding College Chaplain, who is doing a fine job. Kristin was a member of Fourth Presbyterian Church before seminary and we are all very proud of her.

I am particularly honored to be here for President Phifer's final Baccalaureate and Commencement. He

represents the very best of the unique independent liberal arts college tradition in our country. He has been an extraordinarily distinguished, faithful and effective President for this institution. He hands on to his successor a strong liberal arts college and his vision and inspiring leadership will be reflected for all the years to come. I add my voice to many others this weekend —“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

I’ve attended five of these events as a parent. Next weekend I will attend another one, my second, as a grandparent. If I stretch my imagination a bit, I vaguely recall sitting , a long time ago, where you are sitting this morning, in a kind of suspended animation, a little bleary-eyed from the over exertion of last night’s party. I recall a mixture of relief that I actually made it and just a twinge of anxiety at what was now ahead. And, I recall a bit of boredom. Someone did a study to see what graduates retained and remembered about their graduation ten years afterward. Baccalaureate sermon and Commencement speeches were pretty low on the list.

In an old Doonesbury comic strip about college commencement. Three robed  graduates are slouched in their folding chairs, staring blankly ahead, in a kind of trance. One is reading a magazine. Another is listening to music. The third looks up to the podium and asks out loud, “Who’s the old guy?” The first grad puts his magazine down and responds, “I think that’s the President.” “President of what?’ the questioner asks. I tell that story knowing full well that it does not apply to this college and this President.

We do subject ourselves to a lot of rhetoric on this occasion: sermons, speeches, admonition, inspiring challenges and lots and lots of advice. We do it because everyone knows it is important, a defining moment.

You have a lot invested in getting here, not the least financially. So do your families. Parents love graduation. They may become a little tearful. They can't help but be nostalgic today and tomorrow, remembering when you were born, your first day of school. They think it was just yesterday when they dropped you off to begin your freshman year. They are, I know, also very proud. And some of them are thinking "Monday, we are going to be rich." Whatever else you do this weekend, thank them for all they have done to bring you to this day.

Coe College is deeply invested in you. Your education cost a lot more than you and your parents paid for. So, the Administration hopes you have paid your bills and will become a contributor, an altogether good and necessary thing to do—to keep this enterprise vital and strong, perhaps for your own children some day.

The faculty will remember you and follow you and watch attentively as your future unfolds. They hope you will remember their names, which I know you will. Truth be told, Faculty love this weekend. They are not exactly glad to see you go, but they do like summer.

The question of the day, of course, is "What now?" A question poet Mary Oliver asks in her elegant poem, "The Summer Day." It is a cardinal rule of public speaking not to quote poems in their entirety. But, this

is a good one and my favorite. So, here it is, “The Summer Day.”

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The question of the day is “What now?” How will you live your one and only precious life? How will you live your life fully? How will you remain alive? How do you be happy?

There are a lot of resources on the topic, book after book, a phenomenon known as “The Happiness

Industry.” Some of them are pretty trivial. Happiness is getting what you want, and getting what you want is a natter of willing it, believing it. “Name it–claim it,” a popular televangelist says. Some of it is blatantly phony and exploitative: “send in your money and you’ll feel better about yourself.” And some of it is high brow, intellectually and academically rigorous, based on psychological and sociological research. The New York Times lead review a few weeks ago featured Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky who teaches psychology at the University of California. Her two books *The How of Happiness* and *The Myth of Happiness* are so highly regarded that her academic colleagues call her “The Queen of Happiness.” Professor Lyubomirsky argues that you have a “happiness set point” encoded in your genes. When nice things happen, you become happy. When not-so-nice things happen, you become unhappy —which didn’t seem particularly profound to me. Perhaps I missed something.

Popular American author Gore Vidal weighed into the debate once by saying “For true happiness, it is not enough to be successful oneself, one’s friends must fail.”

It’s complicated business, happiness is. It’s big business. It sells a lot of books and seminars and retreats. It’s what we all want. It is also stunningly simple. We want to be happy. We want to live in a way that makes us happy.

It is also a very old topic. One day, a long time ago, a man asked a teacher, a young Jewish rabbi, with a growing reputation, about it. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The common

definition of “eternal life” is something that happens after you die. But it is broader, bigger than that. It has more to do with life in the here and now. “What must I do to be really alive?”

“What does our law say?” Jesus asked. The man responded, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said, “That’s it. That’s right. Do this and you will live.”

Now, the man was a lawyer and lawyers ask a lot of questions. So that’s what he does, asks “Just who exactly is my neighbor?”

What comes next is one of the best short stories in the history of stories, certainly one of the most beloved. Scholars point out that the point of this story lies close to the heart of the world’s great religions. It is also the foundation of a system of ethics as well as a way to live your life.

Many of you know this story. Here’s the short form. A man is walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He’s mugged, his money is stolen, he is beaten and left lying beside the road. Two men walk by, see him, and keep on walking. That part of the story always makes me cringe because they both were religious officials.

A third man approaches, a Samaritan, a member of a despised minority. He stops, patches up the man’s wounds, lifts him onto the back of this donkey, takes

him to a guest house, arranges for his care, promises to return and pay the bill.

“Which of these,” Jesus asks, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” “That’s easy,” the lawyer responds. The one who showed him compassion, kindness, the one who allowed the man’s condition to touch his heart, the one who stopped what he was doing and knelt by the roadside and did something to help. The one who loved. “Do this,” Jesus said, “and you will live. Do this and you will be alive.” Do this and you will become the person you were created to be. Do this and you will become truly you.

William Sloane Coffin, long-time Chaplain of Yale, civil rights and peace advocate, put it this way: “Descartes was wrong —‘Cogito ergo sum’ —‘I think therefore I am.’ Nonsense,” Coffin said. “It’s ‘Amo ergo sum’ —‘I love therefore I am.’”

So simple; so radical. So utterly contrary to what our consumer, market culture tells us a thousand times a day, day after day. Buy this, own this, consume this and you will be happy and fully alive. I like to read the Sunday New York Times. It’s an all day project, and I save for last a section of the paper called “Sunday Styles.” I think of it as a Modern American Happiness Manual. The contents are a snap shot of current cultural trends. There are full-page ads for Calvin Klein, Prada, Dior, Lauren — big, full-page shots of anorexic young men and women who look profoundly bored and unhappy. Why do they look so unhappy? I know I’m guilty of way over-interpreting here. But, I conclude every week that models for the Happiness Manual do not look happy because what they are

selling won’t make you happy. It’s a big lie, and I fantasize that these young people are looking bored and terminally unhappy because they know it.

There is an alternative. And, in the midst of all the advice that will shower down on you this weekend, it is what I want to put in front of you: find something to love, find something to give your life to, find someone, some cause, something beyond your own amusement, that calls out to you, your passion, your heart, your love.

Henry Betts is one of the most fascinating people I have ever met: a physician who early in his career noticed how difficult life is for people with physical disabilities. Not only was it difficult to treat them medically, but no one was even trying to address the disability itself, whatever it was. Life for the disabled was miserable, one barrier after another in the process of moving from one place to another, negotiating doorways and aisles and restaurants and bathrooms. It was confining and humiliating and debilitating. So Henry Betts went to work, not only devising new, ground-breaking techniques for the process of rehabilitation, but threw himself into the social and political arena, advocating, arguing, lobbying for better, kinder, more compassionate public policy. Curb cuts, for instance, so simple, but so absolutely necessary if you are in a wheelchair. Dr. Betts founded the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, the leading rehabilitation facility in the nation and he inspired and helped write the “Americans with Disabilities Act” which literally moved mountains and made life better for millions of Americans.

It is my honor to know him. Over a pleasant lunch he told me a story I have never forgotten. It happened while Dr. Betts was the Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. A teenaged boy, a quadriplegic, in a room by himself became withdrawn, terribly depressed, stopped communicating with anyone, refused to interact with the staff, wouldn't get out of bed for therapy, assumed a fetal position facing the wall and went into what Dr. Betts called "total withdrawal from life." He apparently had decided that there was nothing to live for, no reason to go on living. The staff of the Institute was afraid he would die.

And then, because there was no available appropriate space, the staff put a severely burned three-year-old boy in the room with him. The teenager turned his back and ignored the little boy at first. Then, slowly, he began to notice him and watch him and listen to what the doctors and nurses and physical therapists were saying about him. And then a miracle happened. The depressed teenager began to care about his little roommate. Before long, he was pressing the call button, telling nurses to bring pain medicine, nagging the staff: "maybe he needs a drink of water, more food, he's not eating enough." And then he started to report to the doctors and nurses what he observed and began to advise them as to the little boy's treatment and therapy. He became animated: "why don't you try this?....that?"

The teenager, literally, came back to life when he opened his heart and started to care about another human being.

And that is what I pray for you this morning—health and success, of course, but far more important, I pray that you care deeply, that you will find someone to love more than you love your own life, that you will find some cause beyond your own comfort, that calls out of you—your energy, your imagination, your intelligence and creativity—which is to say, your love.

Congratulations, Members of the Class of 2013, and God bless you, today and tomorrow and all the days ahead.